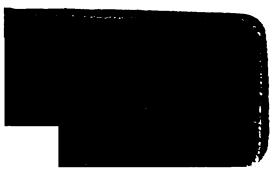
Food for the Soul

Margaret Deland



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"CHANGE IT? MY NAME?" SHE SAID

GOOD FOR THE SOUL

By

Margaret Deland

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GOOD FOR THE SOUL

Good for the Soul

I

It was about twelve or thirteen years before Dr. Lavendar was discovered to have outlived his usefulness that, one night, in the parsonage study, with only Mary, and his brother, Joey Lavendar, as witnesses, he married Peter Day. Peter, with a pretty girl on his arm, drifted in out of the windy and rainy darkness, with a license from the Mayor's office in Upper Chester, and a demand that Dr. Lavendar perform the marriage service. Both the man and the woman were strangers to him, and the little old minister looked at them sharply for a minute

or two—he had misgivings, somehow. But the girl was old enough, and looked perfectly satisfied and intelligent, and the man's face was simple and honest—besides, the license was all right. So he asked one or two grave and kindly questions: "You 've thought this well over? You know what a solemn thing marriage is, my friends? You are well assured that you are acting soberly, discreetly, and in the fear of God?"

"Yes, sir," said Peter Day; and the girl, a pretty, sick-looking creature, opened her big brown eyes with a glimmer of interest in them, and said, also, "Yes, sir." So Dr. Lavendar did his duty, and found a surprisingly large fee in his hand, and went back to smoke his pipe and write at least a page on his great work, *The History of Precious Stones.*

That was the last he saw of the unknown bride and groom for many

a long year. Once he heard of a new threshing-machine that was being tried at the Day farm, in the next county, and was interesting two or three farmers in his own parish; but he did not connect the rich and successful farmer of Grafton, a village near Upper Chester, with the man he had married that stormy June night. So, though his neighbors had found them interesting enough, Peter Day's affairs had never come to Dr. Lavendar's ears.

Peter had been commiserated for forty years. His farm was prosperous; it kept pace with all the new machinery, fertilizers were not despised, and there was no waste; the Day heifers had a name all through the State; and a thousand acres of haying-land meant a capital as reliable as government bonds. "I guess he 's worth $75,000 if he 's worth a cent," his neighbors said;

" but the old lady, she won't let on but what they 're as poor as poverty." There was no doubt that Peter Day was prosperous; but, nevertheless, he was commiserated:—*he had a mother.*

" The farm is the best farm in Westmoreland County, but whether Peter can keep it up when the old lady goes, that 's another question."

" He may not keep the farm up, but he can let himself down," Henry Davis, who was the blacksmith, declared; " and I 'll be glad of it! Before Peter Day goes to heaven—I guess there 's no doubt of Peter's going there in due time?—he ought to know something about the earth. He 's acquainted with the Other Place, dear knows, with the old woman!—not that I 'd say anything against her now she 's on her death-bed." Henry put a hand on the bellows, and a roar of blue flame burst through the heap of black fuel

on the forge. "Don't you let on to anybody, but I doubt if Peter 'll ever be more 'an three years old. His mother 's bossed him every breath he breathed since he was born, and he 'll be just real miserable learning to walk alone at forty."

It must be admitted that here was cause for commiseration: All his forty years Mrs. Day had dominated her son's life; she had managed his farm, and he had fetched and carried and improved according to her very excellent judgment. She had formed his opinions—or, rather, she had given him her opinions; she had directed his actions, she had bought his clothes, she had doled out every dollar he spent, and taken scrupulous account of the spending; she had crushed, long ago, any vague thought of marriage he may have had; and she had assured him over and over that he was a fool. A hard, shrewish, hideously plain, marvellously

capable old woman, with a temper which in her later years drew very near the line of insanity. Then she died.

The August afternoon that the little train of silent people carried her out of her own door up to the family burying-ground in the pasture (the Days were of New England stock, and had the feeling of race permanence in their blood, which shows itself in this idea of a burying-ground on their own land)—that August afternoon was sunny and still, except for the sudden song of a locust in the stubble, stabbing the silence and melting into it again. Some sumacs were reddening on the opposite hill-side; and the blossoming buckwheat in the next field was full of the murmur of bees; its hot fragrance lifted and drifted on any wandering breath of wind. Peter Day walked behind the coffin in his best black clothes, with his hat in

his hand; then came the friends and neighbors, two by two. A path had been mowed through the thin second crop of grass; but the women's skirts brushed the early golden-rod growing in the tangle of briers in the angles of the snake-fence. Up in the pasture, where the burial-lot, enclosed by a prim white paling, lay under a great oak, a bird, balancing on a leaning slate headstone, burst into a gurgling laugh of song. The oak dropped moving shadows back and forth on the group of men and women who stood watching silently that solemn merging of living into Life—of consciousness and knowledge and bitterness and spite, of human nature, into Nature. This ending of the mean and pitiful tumult which is so often all that individuality seems to be, this sinking of the unit into the universe, is like the subsidence of some little whirling gust of wind that for an instant

catches up straws and dust and then drops into dead calm. There is a sense of peace about it that is not exactly human; it is organic, perhaps; it only comes where there is no grief. They felt it, these people who stood watching, silently, unbelieving in their hearts that they too would some time go back into sun and shade and rolling world. There was no grief, only curiosity and interest and the sense of peace. When it was over, they walked slowly back again, pausing for some low-voiced talk at the Day doorway, and then leaving Peter, and drawing a longer breath perhaps, and raising their voices to chatter together of the dead woman's temper and meanness and the money she had left.

The little whirl of shrewish wind had fallen into calm; it was "all over," as the saying is—and so much greater is Life than living that it was as though it never had been.

Except to Peter Day. The house had the stillness of that grave he had left up in the pasture. He heard some one move about out in the kitchen, and the clock ticking in the hall. But there was no strident old voice to bid him do this or that; no orders to obey, no fierce and insane fault-finding. The silence was deafening. He sat down in the parlor—the occasion seemed to demand the dignity of the parlor. The chairs had been put back in their places, but the open space in front of the fireplace struck him like a blow; and the lingering scent of the flowers made him feel sick.

He was a short, sturdy-looking man, with a soft black beard, and kind, quiet, near-sighted eyes, which his round spectacles magnified into lambent moons. There was no weakness in his face; but there was patience in every line; just now there was bewilderment.

"Dead?" He was trying, dumbly, to adjust himself to the fact; to understand it, or at least to believe it. He felt something swell in his throat, and very likely he thought it was grief. Habit does much for us in this way; a carping, uncomfortable companionship of forty years is yet a companionship. Life runs in rough grooves, but they are grooves; and when it leaves them there is a wrench and jolt, and perhaps even a crash—and very often it is all mistaken for grief. Peter, in his simple way, called it grief. As he sat there in his black clothes, looking at that open space where the coffin had stood, he was vaguely conscious that he wished he had his dog Jim beside him; but after forty years of being told that he "could not bring dogs and cattle into the house," and that "he was a fool to want to," he would have found the effort of freedom absolute pain. So he sat still

until it grew dusk, trying to believe that she was dead, thinking about heaven—for he was a religious man—and saying to himself that she was "far better off." But never saying that he was "far better off," too.

Of course, as the weeks passed, he adjusted himself to the difference in his condition; he grew accustomed to certain reliefs. Yet he did not realize that he was free. He was like a horse who slips his halter in a tread-mill, but goes on and on and on. He was not harassed by the goad of the strident voice, but he did the same work, in the same way, in the same harsh and unlovely surroundings;—and he did not bring Jim into the house for company! He spent his money on certain meagre essentials of food and fuel, and on necessary improvements of the farm; but he missed his mother's judgment and her shrewd foresight

in such matters. He went to church, and slept heavily during the service; but he never went to the church sociables. His mother had despised them, and he was too old to acquire social habits. He made no effort to be intimate with his neighbors. Mrs. Day had quarrelled with them all, and would not have their names spoken in her presence if she could help it; so, if Peter had a capacity for friendship, these speechless years had made it dumb. Hence he was singularly isolated, untouched by the interest or the gossip or the knowledge of the life about him. He spent his days as he had always spent them, following the lines his mother had laid down for him. He went through the usual round of daily work. In the evenings he read his agricultural paper or an old book of sermons. There was no one to tell him to go to bed; and once he fell asleep, his arms stretched

on the table in front of him, and wakened in the cold early light, stiff and bewildered, and heavy with fatigue. But there was one point on which Peter Day was perfectly clear: he might, through stupidity or dulness, go on in the tread-mill now that the halter was slipped, but —he was glad to miss the goad!

The final awakening to a knowledge that he was free came some ten months later. It was in June; a hot, sparkling day, when every hand on the farm had twice as much as he could do. Something had gone wrong about the mower; and Peter, with Jim at his heels, went into the village to get the blacksmith to weld a broken rod together. It was a loss of time, this hanging about the blacksmith's shop waiting for the work to be done, and the old habit of uneasiness, because of his mother's rage at any delay, made him tramp about, frowning and

pressing his lips together, and looking up the road as though fearing some messenger sent to bid him hasten.

The shop was dark, except for the red flicker when the smith thrust his pincers into the heap of ashes with one hand and started the bellows with the other. Then a shower of sparks flew up the great black cone of the chimney, and Peter could see his piece of broken iron whiten in the flames. He looked at his watch restlessly and walked to the door and back.

"Ain't you 'most done?"

"I ain't. And I won't be for a half-hour," Henry Davis said. "What 's the matter with you, Peter, anyway? What 's your hurry? It would n't kill anybody if you did n't get back till to-morrow. Your other machine 's going. There ain't no dyin' need of this here one, anyhow."

"Well, I ain't one to waste time," Peter said. Jim yawned, and stretched himself on the bare black earth of the floor. He, at least, was in no hurry.

"Well, whose time are you wastin'?" the smith insisted, good-naturedly. "It 's your own, ain't it? I guess you got a right to loaf. There 's no one to say you nay," he ended.

"That 's so," said Peter. But he still tramped back and forth, until the smith, turning the bar about on his anvil, cried:

"For the Lord's sake, Peter Day, get out! Go on up to Main Street and get a shave. Get out o' here, anyhow."

Peter laughed, and went, saying that he 'd be back in ten minutes. "And mind you have that done!"

He loitered along, looking at his watch more than once, and coming to a standstill before the window of

a grocery store. He did not go in. All these years the curb of his mother's will had held him away from the shiftless and friendly gatherings about the stove or around the back counter, and he seemed to feel it yet. So he only looked into the dusty window. There were wooden rakes stacked up at one side, and boxes of cotton lace, and two jars of red and white sticks of candy, and fly-specked cups and saucers in thick white earthen-ware; there were some advertisements of poultry food pasted against the glass, and a print of a new mower. He took these in absently, looking at his watch, and wondering if the bar was nearly done. And then his eye caught a colored lithograph propped up against some tin-ware. A row of girls, smiling, coquettish, marching, each with slippered foot well advanced, holding out a gay skirt with the thumb and forefinger of one

hand, and flirting with the other a huge feather fan across arch and laughing eyes. The flutter of the pink and blue and white skirts, the slender ankles, the invitation and challenge and impertinence of the upward kick, seemed to Peter Day perfectly beautiful. He gazed at the picture, absorbed and entranced. The owner of the shop, standing in his doorway, watched him, grinning.

"You better go see 'em, Mr. Day. They 're to be here to-night. The parson 's mad, I tell you."

Peter came to himself with a start, and read the announcement of the production in the town-hall, on such a date and at such an hour, of *Sweet Rosy*. The notice below the picture set forth:

The Four Montague Sisters will Perform their Charming, Refined, and Side-splitting Farce, with all Accessories of Magnificent Scenery, Exquisite Music,

and Elaborate Costumes. The Ballet is pronounced to be the most Beautiful, in Loveliness of Form and Perfection of Grace, ever seen in America.

YOUTH. GRACE. BEAUTY.

ADMISSION, 35 CENTS.

"We 've never had one of these here shows up here," said the storekeeper; "but of course I 've seen 'em. I always go when I 'm in the city, because my example can't injure nobody there. Here it 's different. This one is n't as bad as some, I understand. Why don't you go and see 'em, Mr. Day?"

Why did n't he? Peter Day went back to the blacksmith's shop for his rod, and walked home "studying." Why should n't he go to see the show? He did not ask himself whether there was anything wrong in such shows—he never had asked himself such questions. There was nothing abstract about Peter. He

had simply ducked and winced under his mother's tongue, and accepted her decisions of what was right or wrong, avoiding, by a sort of instinct, the things that roused the furious temper which lay always ready to flash and roar and shake the house down at any most trivial excuse. In ten months he had gotten more or less used to peace, even if he had not taken advantage of it. But why should n't he take advantage of it ?

He looked through his round spectacles at Jim jogging along in the dust in front of him, with a sort of absent intentness. " I 'm going to see them," he said to himself. " Why not ? "

So he went. He went that very night.

II

The town-hall in Grafton stood in the square; winter rains had washed

and washed against its narrow, faded old bricks until the plaster between them had crumbled and the angles had worn down. The white paint on the facings and on the great beam that made the base of the pediment had flaked and blistered; a crack ran from a second-story window down towards the front door, which sagged a little in its battered white frame. Inside, the wooden steps were so worn that the knots stood out on them:—innumerable town meetings, fairs, lectures, and all such entertainments as this of the Montague Sisters, made much travel over the wide, shallow staircase. The walls were bare, the plaster stained and cracked, even broken in two or three places, and studded with nails for all the different decorations of pine or flags or crape or flowers which had gone up and come down in more than fifty years. There were lanterns in brackets along the

walls, and a dusty chandelier in the middle of the ceiling held eight lamps, that cast flickering shadows down on the bare floor and the rows of wooden settees, which, when Mr. Day arrived, were quite empty—such was his anxiety to get a good seat. The audience came stamping and scuffling in, with a good deal of laughter, and much loud, good-natured raillery, and some cat-cries. Very likely the parson had reason for "being mad." *Sweet Rosy; or, The Other Man*, was the play, and there was a suggestiveness in the names of the acts which would have forewarned anybody but Peter.

He had no experience in indecencies. He was tingling with excitement; the sudden and unusual concentration of thought and feeling was not without pain—it was, mentally, like the awaking of a hand or a foot which has been asleep.

The curtain rolled up, caught—

and displayed a pair of slender ankles, and opposite them two Wellington boots, fiercely spurred—rolled on, and showed a man decorated with stars and sashes and sword, which informed the audience that he was a soldier; and a girl, in fluffy pink skirts, high-heeled pink slippers, low pink satin skin-tight bodice, pink lips, pink cheeks, pink hat and feathers. Her neck and bosom were as white as swan's down, and glittered with "diamonds," that did not seem any more sparkling than her arch brown eyes, which laughed over her pink fan — laughed and winked, and looked right down at Peter Day in the front seat. He grew white, and his mouth fell open; he looked at his programme, the flimsy sheet rustling in his big trembling hands until his neighbors looked at him with impatience.

"Bessie Montague." That was

her name—Bessie! The soldier, it appeared, was Bessie's brother, who was instructing her about the "Other Man," Mr. Wilson, who was shortly to appear—hampered, indeed, by Mrs. Wilson; but if Bessie and her sisters, Minnie, Nellie, Mamie, would play their cards properly, the mere incident of the wife would make no difference. They would go to a picnic with the Other Man, and then, and *then*, and THEN!—came a rollicking chorus, with Minnie and Mamie and Nellie dancing round and round, Bessie the gayest of them all, and the Other Man and the Incident coming on to be hoodwinked, in sober and decent clothes and sanctimonious air. The audience roared at each innuendo; and Peter, smiling and palpitating like a girl, took it all to mean that the four girls wanted the fun of a picnic, and were going to get the old dodger with the hayseed in his hair to give it to them.

At least, when he thought about the play at all, that was his construction of it; but he hardly thought of it—the dancing enthralled him. It seemed to him that Mamie and Minnie said things that were n't just modest sometimes, but a girl does n't understand half the time what words mean; very likely they did n't know why the masculine part of the audience roared so. Nellie had almost nothing to say, and Bessie was the première danseuse, and only joined in the choruses. To Peter, from the first moment, she was the most fascinating figure on the stage. Her dancing and coquetting and pirouetting, her glances and gurgling laughter and gestures, went to his head. He saw nothing else; the tawdry scenery, the soiled cotton velvet and flimsy crumpled satin, the reek of vulgarity, never touched his innocent mind. He looked at her open-mouthed, breathless. The play was

about half over, when it seemed to him that this angel, or fairy, or whatever she was, flagged and began to look tired. Once he saw the soldier frown, and make a gesture to show that she had done something wrong, and he saw a frightened wince under the smiles and paint on the girl's face. Peter Day ground his teeth. How dared the brute look that way at his sister? That was no way for a brother to look! From that point he only saw Bessie; he saw her growing whiter, though he noticed that the color in her cheek was as bright as ever—which seemed to him a very unhealthy sign.

"It 's that way in consumption," he thought. He felt impelled to leap up on the stage and tell her brother he ought to take better care of her; and then her dancing fascinated him so that he forgot her pallor for a while—then noticed it with sharp compunction.

The last whirl and pigeon-wing, the last kick and flurry of gauze skirts, the last leer—then, standing on one leg, each sister kissed her hand, bit her lip, looked down into the audience and winked, and—it was over!

Peter Day sat like a man in a dream. Somebody cuffed him on the shoulder and said, "Did they put you to sleep?" and there was a guffaw of laughter.

He shook his head silently and got up; he looked about in a dazed way for a minute, and then went stumbling out into the cool night.

As for "Bessie," she sat down on an overturned soap-box behind the scenes and panted.

"You 've got a mash, Liz!" one of the girls called out, beginning to wash off the paint.

"Oh, I 'm so tired!" she said, faintly. "Oh, this is a dog's life!"

"Guess he 's waiting at the side

door," Mamie suggested; " he looks good for a supper, anyway. Make him stand up to us all, Liz, will you ? "

" Shut up," the girl said. " I 'm nearly dead."

" You 'll hear that from Dickinson, I bet," one of the " sisters " informed her; and then, with rough kindliness, brought her a dash of whiskey in a dirty tumbler. " There, brace up! I don't believe he 'll say anything. My God, I thought you were going to drop there once! Did you see Johnny Mack glare at you when you crossed behind ? If he 'll keep his mouth shut and not complain, I guess you won't hear from it. I wish you did n't have to move on to-morrow, though."

III

However, they did move on; that is what it means to be " on the

road" and have one-night stands. The "Montague Sisters" moved on, and Peter Day moved with them.

The first step into liberty had been taken when he went to the play; then some door seemed to shut behind him; the automatic life stopped short; he felt, for the first time since he was twenty, when his mother had nipped in the bud certain tendencies towards love-making, the consciousness that he had a life of his own. And he began to live it. He announced that he was going away for a week or two.

"What! *now?*" ejaculated one of the hands. "Why, we 're that busy—"

"I 'm going," his employer said, and set his lips in a dogged way that he had learned under his mother's scoldings; it meant that he had no explanation to give, and no retort; but it meant, too, in this instance, will. So he packed a valise made

of Brussels carpet—crimson roses on a cream-colored ground—and said good-by to Jim, and started.

The Montague Sisters went to Mercer, and on to two or three smaller places, and then back again on the circuit towards Old Chester. It took nearly three weeks, and Peter Day never missed a performance. The company grew hysterical with laughter over him; the "sisters" played to him, and winked at him, and kicked their high-heeled slippered feet in his direction, and threw kisses to him over their white shoulders that were so dangerously above their bodices; but it was more than a week before he made the acquaintance of the manager and was introduced to them.

"It 's a dead mash for Liz," the manager announced. "Say, Liz, can't you get him to give you a theatre? Come, now, don't forget the company when you strike it

rich." Liz laughed, and groaned, and dropped down on the broken springs of the horse-hair couch in the parlor of the little hotel.

"Somebody 'd better give me a grave," she said. "Say, Dickinson, I 'm played out." She began to cry, and the manager told her, good-naturedly, not to be a fool.

"I 'll send you up something that 'll make you feel better," he said. But the cocktail and the kindness only made her cry the more.

"I don't know what 's going to become of me," she told the "sisters." "I can't keep this up; there 's no use talking!"

Mamie sat down on the table, swinging her legs back and forth, and looking concerned. "Well, now, can't you go home awhile?" she said.

Bessie looked up impatiently. "I have n't any home. I have n't had

for six years. I came into this to support mother, and when she—died, I did n't have any home. As for relations, I 've got some relations somewhere, but they 're too good for the likes of me! No, no!" She got up, the tears dried, and her dark eyes sparkled wickedly; the cocktail had brought a little color into her cheeks, and she was as pretty as when she stood before the foot-lights in vivid rouge and snow-white powder. She took two dancing steps. "No—no!—

"Here! here 's to all the world!
What the hell does it care—
What the hell does it care
For me?"

"Except Hayseed," Mamie reminded her, with a thoughtful frown. "He cares, it appears. I say, Liz, I suppose you *could* lay off, and—"

The girl turned on her savagely.

"Now look here; shut up! *He 's good.*"

Mamie shrieked with laughter. "Oh, he does n't bite, does n't he?"

"He does n't try to make me bite," the other said, sharply; then suddenly broke down again, and flung up her arms, and said she wished she was dead. "Talk about a home! If I could stop, if I could have a little house of my own, and maybe a garden—well, there! I 'm a fool. You need n't tell me; I know it. But I tell you what, Mame, it 's hell; that 's what it is, this road business—putting yourself up to be insulted by every man that pays fifty cents to see you dance. I 'm dead tired of it. Oh, my God, I wish I was dead!" But even as she said it she burst into a laugh, her brown eyes crinkling up with fun. "Mamie, what do you suppose? He asked me to-day what my sisters

thought of my working so hard. ' Sisters ? ' I said,—I was so tired I was just dead stupid. ' Sisters ? ' I says. ' I have n't any sisters.' He looked dumb-struck. Then I caught on."

" He is an innocent ! " Mamie said.

" He 's good," the other answered, with a sob.

She was as inconsequent and unmoral, this little, flashing, suffering, pretty creature, as the sparkle of sunshine on a rippling wave. And she was, just now, almost at the limit of her strength. The simple-hearted man who, through his big steel-rimmed spectacles, looked at her every night from the first row, and came to see her every morning, as silent and as faithful as a dog, saw in her all the beauty and grace and good-nature of which his harmless life had been starved. He thought to himself, over and over, how pleasant she was. He had had little

enough pleasantness in his forty arid years, dear knows! so it was easy to recognize it when he saw it.

He was bewildered, and dazzled, and happy, and tumultuously in love. He felt as if he wanted to play with her; to romp, and run, and laugh, as though they were boy and girl. He was getting young, this sober, elderly man, and the warm-hearted, quick-witted little actress, with her peals of laughter, her funny winks, and grimaces, and good-natured raillery, was the cause of it. He never knew how hotly she defended him from the suspicions of the rest of the company: she was so quick to recognize his "goodness" that she turned white with anger when his motives were assailed. When he told her once, blushing, that he was glad she just only danced, because some of the things the other young ladies said were n't just according to his notions, she

winced and set her white teeth. "I don't like those jokes," she said; "truly I don't, Mr. Day."

He laughed at that, in his soft, big voice, his eyes beaming at her through his spectacles.

"You! Well, you need n't tell me that, Miss Montague. You don't understand, even. Well, now, a girl seems to me just like one of those white butterflies that 's always round milkweed. You know 'em? 'Brides,' the young ones call them. Their wings — you can't hardly breathe on 'em but what they 're spoiled! Well, it 's like touching their wings, to have girls sing trashy songs; and I 'm right sorry the other ladies feel obliged to do it."

"Oh, if I ever had time to go to walk in the country and see the 'brides'!" she said, her eyes suddenly wet. "I 'm pretty tired of this kind of life."

He made an impulsive gesture,

and opened his lips; but he dared not speak. As for her, she went up to the hotel parlor, and sat on the horse-hair sofa under the steel engraving of the " Landing of the Pilgrims," and told Mamie she wished she was dead.

Peter Day knew no better than to make his protest to Dickinson, who winked at the barkeeper to call his attention to the joke. " I 'm thinking of getting up a Sunday-school play for 'em next season," he said.

Peter was no fool; he did not pursue the subject; but he had his own views. In his cramped, unlovely life, the single exponent of the everlasting feminine had been his mother. Yet he had his ideals: he believed in goodness and in purity in a way that even a man who had known them in their human limitations might not have done. In his grave and simple way, he knew the world was wicked. But he would not have

those white-winged creatures whom he revered have even so much knowledge as that.

At the end of the third week the Montague Sisters came to Old Chester; they had two nights here, and it was on the second night that Bessie broke down absolutely, and fainted dead away. They were all very kind to her—the manager and the other "sisters." They were in and out of her room all that night, and Dickinson would have given her all the whiskey the tavern afforded if it would have done any good. But business is business; the troupe was advertised to appear in the next town, and they had to move on. So, with protestations, and most honest anxiety, and the real, practical kindness of leaving some money for her board with the tavern-keeper, they moved on. But Peter Day stayed behind.

He saw her every day for a week;

he went up to her room, and washed her little hot face and hands, and fed her with cracked ice, and told her about Jim; and his eyes, behind his magnifying spectacles, beamed like two kindly moons.

"I 'm going to marry her," he told the tavern-keeper, "just as soon as she can get out."

It was a week before she could sit up; when she did, in a big wooden rocking-chair, with roses painted on the back, and slippery linen covers tied on the arms, he came and sat beside her and put his hand on hers.

"Miss Montague," he said, his voice trembling, "I am going to ask a—a favor."

"My name is n't Montague," she told him, her eyes crinkling with a laugh; "that 's only my stage name."

"Oh!" he said, blankly; "I thought it was. Still, it does n't

matter; because — because, Miss Montague—"

"Donald," she interrupted, smiling.

"Because, Miss Donald, I was going to ask you to—to change it."

"Change it? My name?" she said. "You don't mean—"

"I want you to marry me," he said, his hand suddenly closing hard on hers. She drew back with a cry; looked at him with wide eyes; then she put her hands over her face and began to cry, poor child, in a wailing, heart-broken way. To cry—and cry—and cry, while he just put his arms about her and drew her head down on his breast, and stroked her soft, dark, curling hair, soothing her and cuddling her, and saying: "There—there! I frightened you. Never mind; it 's only me. It 's only Peter. There, there, there!"

She tried to say: "No; oh *no!* he must not think of it. He—he did n't

know her. Oh no—*no!* She was not good enough. No, she could n't, she could n't!"

But he gathered her up in his arms, and put his cheek down against her hair, and said: "There, there; it 's all right, and I 've got the license."

She was so weak that suddenly she fainted, and Peter was like a madman until young Willie King had been rushed in, and said it was all right, and she would be none the worse the next morning. Which, indeed, she was not. Something had braced her; perhaps it was the human kindness that went to her heart like wine.

"I 'll be good to him; I 'll make it up to him," she said, crying peacefully to herself. "Oh, I will be good to him; and I 'm so tired—tired—*tired.* And I 'll do everything for him. And I can rest; for all my life I can just rest."

So that was how it came about that, the evening of the first day she was able to go out, Peter took her, carried her almost, to Dr. Lavendar's study, where they were reminded that marriage was not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly —but soberly, discreetly, and in the fear of God.

IV

Of course it is perfectly obvious how a " sober and discreet " marriage of this nature must end. The elderly, simple-minded, plain countryman, and the little actress whose past had never been laid under her neighbor's eyes—what could happen, says the wise world, but disaster and pain ?

And yet neither befell.

He took her home, this gentle, passionate, pitying husband, and nursed her, and petted her, and played with her. All the checked

and stunted youth in him blossomed out. He told her his thoughts—for on his slow way, it seems, he had thoughts. He let her see his simple adoration of the ideals which she embodied:—gentleness, and prettiness, and purity. He was jealous to shield her from every rough wind, from every cruel knowledge; all the love of all his bleak unlovely life was poured into her lap. And she was very "pleasant" with him. She felt towards Peter that warm-hearted admiration which begins in appreciation and ends in love. He was so good to her—that was the first thing the wife felt; and then, he was so good!

She laughed at him and sung to him, and even put on her pink dress and danced for him sometimes. And she brought Jim into the very parlor itself! At first, very likely, it was all part of the play of life to her. She could appreciate, if Peter could

not, the stage setting, so to speak—the bare, ugly parlor, with its landscape-papered walls and faded photographs of dead relatives hanging in oval black frames very near the ceiling; the lustres on the high wooden mantel-piece; the big Bible on the crocheted mat of the centre table; the prim, uncomfortable sofa, and the rosewood chairs standing at exact angles in the windows; and Peter, with Jim's head on his knee, sitting, gaping at her—gaping at the incongruous, joyous, dancing figure, with the pink skirt twirling over pink gauze petticoats! At first the fun of the contrast was a keen enjoyment; but after a while—

However, that came later.

Meantime she *rested.* Sometimes on his knee, with her head on his shoulder, while he tried to read his agricultural paper, but had to stop because she teased him into laughter; sometimes on a little couch out under

the trees, on the sunny side of the house, where she could see Peter working in the garden. She found not only rest but intense interest in this garden, which, to be sure, was rather. commonplace. There were clumps of perennials in the borders, upon which each year the grass encroached more and more; and there were shrubs, and some seedlings sown as the wind listed, and there were a dozen ragged old rose-bushes. But Bessie Day threw herself into taking care of all the friendly old-fashioned fragrance, heart and soul, and body too, which made her tired and strong and happy all together. She used to lie awake those summer nights and plan the garden she was going to have next year; and she pored over seedsmen's catalogues with a passionate happiness that made her bright face brighter and brought a look of keen and joyous interest into her eyes.

That was the first year; the second, the ballet dress was put away, for there was a baby. And by-and-by there were two babies—a young Peter and a young Donald; and then a little girl that the father said must be named Pleasant. It was then that Bessie got dissatisfied with her own name, and insisted that she be called Elizabeth. So the old name, like the old pink satin dress and fan and high-heeled slippers, was put away in the past. Sometimes Peter talked about them, but Elizabeth would scold him and say she was tired of them, and she would n't allow them to be mentioned. " I 'll steal your spectacles, Peter, if you tease me," she would threaten, gayly; " I go to church, nowadays, and the minister says it is n't right to dance—though I don't know that I just agree with him," she would add, a little gravely.

" Anything you ever did was

right;—right enough for a minister to do himself!" Peter would declare, stoutly.

"I would n't like to see the parson in pink petticoats," Elizabeth would retort, her eyes twinkling with fun.

She always went to church with Peter, and he kept awake to look at her pretty face in her Sunday bonnet; and later, when the children began to come, he had his hands full to keep the boys in order, and not let them read their library books during the sermon. Elizabeth, in her best lavender silk, which had little sprigs over it, and an embroidered white crêpe shawl, and a bonnet with soft white strings, sat at the top of the pew, with Pleasant's sleepy head against her shoulder, looking so cheerful and pretty that it was no wonder Peter looked oftener at her than at the parson.

So the placid years came and went, and by-and-by Peter's wife was no longer slight; but she was as light on her feet as a girl, and her face was as bright and pretty as ever, and her laugh was like the sunny chuckle of a brook; her children and her garden and her husband filled her life, and she made theirs.

As for the neighbors, social life came slowly, because of Peter's long indifference to it; but it came, and people said they liked Mrs. Day because she was so different from other folks—" always real pleasant," her neighbors said.

So it was that nearly ten years passed before that shadow, of whose coming the world would have had no doubt, fell, little by little, into the dark bright eyes and across the smiling lips. Fell, and deepened and deepened.

" You 're not well, wife ? " Peter said, anxiously.

"Nonsense!" she said, smiling at him.

But when he left her, her face settled into heavy lines.

"If you don't look better tomorrow," Peter threatened, "I 'll have the doctor."

"The doctor!" his wife cried, laughing. "Why, I am perfectly well."

And, indeed, the doctor could not discover that she was ill in any way. "Then why does she look so badly?" Peter urged, blinking at him with anxious eyes.

"Oh, she 's a little overtired," the doctor assured him, easily. "I think she works too hard in that garden of hers. I think I 'd put a stop to that, Mr. Day."

And having done his worst, this worthy meddler with the body departed, to prescribe physical exercise for a brain-worker at the point of exhaustion. But Peter

was grateful for some positive instructions.

"The children and I will take care of the garden, and you can just look on. What you need is rest."

So, to please him, she tried to rest; but the shadow deepened in her eyes, and the fret of thought wore lines in her smooth forehead. She shook her head over Peter's offer to take care of the garden.

"What! trust my precious flowers to a mere man?" she cried, with the old gayety, and burlesque anger. "Indeed I won't!"

The garden Peter had made for her was a great two-hundred-foot square, sunk between four green terraces; it was packed with all sorts of flowers, and overflowing with fragrance; all the beds were bordered with sweet-alyssum and mignonette, and within them the flowers stood, pressing their glowing faces together in masses of riotous color—the glit-

tering satin yellow of California poppies, the heavenly blue of nemophila; crimson mallow, snow-white shining phlox; sweet-pease and carnations, gillyflowers and bachelor's-buttons, and everywhere the golden sparks of coreopsis; there were blots of burning scarlet, sheets of orange and lilac and dazzling white. Elizabeth used to sit down by some border to weed, smiling at her flowers, putting her fingers under some shy sweet face, to raise it, and look down into it, rejoicing in the texture and color and perfume, and then, suddenly, her pleasant eyes would cloud and her energy flag, and she would sit there, absent and heavy, the pain wearing deep into her forehead.

By the time another year had come her whole face had changed; her eyes so rarely crinkled up with fun that one had a chance to see how big and sad and terror-stricken they had grown, and her mouth took certain

pitiful lines, and seemed always about to open into sad and wailing words. Another year—they had been married twelve years now—had certainly brought this husband and wife nearer to that dreadful verge of disaster, which the sober looker-on must surely have prophesied on that night when the man and woman stood up to be married in Doctor Lavendar's study.

It was in June that Elizabeth Day said to her husband, gayly, that she had a plan. "Now don't scold, Peter, but listen. I suppose you will say I 'm crazy; but I have a notion I want to go off and take a drive, all by myself, for a whole day."

"I 'll drive you," he said, "anywhere you want."

"No," she said, coming and sitting down on his knee; "no; let me go by myself. I 'll tell you: I think I 'm a little nervous, and I 've a notion to take a drive by myself. I

think maybe I 'll feel better for it."

"Well," he said, wistfully, "if you want to; but I 'd like to go with you."

But she would not listen to that; and she was so cheerful at the very prospect of her drive—"just real senseless glad!" her husband called it, anxiously—that he began to think that perhaps she was right, and it would do her good.

"Like giving a sick person what they 've got a longing for," he told himself. "I know mother told me how she knew of a child that was getting over scarlet fever, and wanted a pickle, and teased and teased for it; and they gave it to her, and she got well. Very likely Elizabeth just has a kind of craving to ride round for a day. Well, she shall. Mercy! she shall have just anything in the Lord's world, if I can get it for her! I wish the buggy was n't

so shabby. I must be getting a new one for her."

Still, when the moment came for her to start, he was anxious again.

"Suppose you take one of the children along for company?" he said, as he helped her into the buggy. (Oh, how light she was! What a thrill and tremor he felt in her hand when his big fingers closed over it!) "Take Pleasant," he entreated. And she agreed, with a sigh.

"I don't mind, if you want me to, Peter."

So Pleasant, uttering shrieks of joy, ran for her hat, and began to climb up to join her mother, too excited to wait for her father's helping hand.

Elizabeth Day gathered up the reins and gave a little flickering look up at the front of the house—at the two boys sitting on the porch steps —at her husband standing beside

the buggy, stretching over the wheels to tuck the duster round her feet. It was early—she had stipulated for an early start—the dew stretched like a cobweb over the grass, and in the border a cloud of scarlet poppies was beaded with drops like silver; the honeysuckle at the end of the porch was pouring its fragrance from curved and polished horns. She had planted that honeysuckle twelve years ago. How happy she had been then! Now, faithful wife, tender mother, modest, careful housewife — *good*, too, she thought to herself, humbly —she was not happy. Oh, most miserable, most miserable!

How strange it is that the tree whose fruit is suffering and pain, is the knowledge of good as well as of evil! Perhaps the single knowledge of either would not mean anything; or perhaps there cannot be knowledge of one without knowledge of the other. Here is a great mystery:

we poor little creatures cannot understand that He both makes peace and creates evil for His own purposes. This poor girl, in her pure and placid life here on the farm, had eaten of this tree, and the anguish of the knowledge of goodness had fallen on her. She groaned under her breath, looking at the dear house and at the dear love. . . .

Elizabeth shook the reins and nodded, smiling: "Good-by, boys, don't bother father; be good children. Good-by, Peter."

"When will you be back?" her husband said, his hand on the bridle —the horse backed and fretted, and his wife scolded good-naturedly.

"I 'll never get off! Come! go on, Captain. Oh, well, then—to-night, maybe."

"To-night!" Peter echoed blankly. "Well, I should say so! Pleasant, take care of mother"; and he let her start, but stood looking down

the road, watching the hood of the buggy jogging up and down, until the light dust almost hid it.

Elizabeth leaned back in her seat and drew a great breath of relief. Pleasant, smiling all over her little round face, looked up at her.

"Mother, may I hold the reins?" she said.

"Take the ends of them," Elizabeth said; "mother will keep her hands in front of yours, for fear Captain should take a notion to run."

Pleasant, beaming, and crinkling her eyes up as her mother had done before her, shook and jerked at the ends of the reins, saying, "Get up, there!" and clucked as she had heard her father do; then, squaring her elbows, she braced her feet against the dash-board. "If Captain was to run, mother, this is the way I 'd stop him," she said, proudly.

"Yes, dear child," the mother

answered, mechanically. She drove without any uncertainty or hesitation as to her route, and carefully sparing her horse, as one who has a long journey before her. It was growing warmer; the dew had burned off, and the misty look of early morning had brightened into clear soft blue without a cloud. There was a shallow run beside the road, which chattered and chuckled over its pebbly bed, or plunged down in little waterfalls a foot high, running over stones smooth with moss, or stopping in the shadows under leaning trees, and spreading into little pools, clear and shining and brown as Pleasant's eyes.

"It would be nice to wade, would n't it, mother?" the child said; and the mother said again, mechanically,

"Yes, dear."

She did not see the run, which by-and-by widened into a creek as

it and the road went on together; and when Captain began to climb a long, sunny slope, she only knew the difference because the sweating horse fell into an easy walk. Pleasant chattered without ceasing.

"It 's nice to come with you, mother. Where are we going? Mother, I think I must have been unusually good, don't you, for God to let me have this ride, and hold Captain's reins? I wonder if Captain knows I 've got the ends of the reins? He does n't *try* to run, you see; I guess he knows he could n't, with me to help you hold him. Oh, look at the bird sitting on the fence! Well, I 'm glad I 've been good lately,—or else, probably, I would n't have come with you. Donald was bad yesterday; he pulled the kitty's tail very hard; so I notice God did n't let him come. I never pull the kitty's tail," she ended, virtuously. It paid to be good, Pleasant

thought; and said, " Get up, there, Captain! " and jerked the reins so hard that her mother came out of her thoughts with a start.

" Don't, Pleasant! Don't pull so, dear."

" Mother, when you were a little girl, did you ever go and drive with your mother, like me ? "

" Yes, Pleasant."

" Was she nice—was she as nice as you ? "

" A great deal nicer, Pleasant."

" My! " said Pleasant. " I suppose she let you drive altogether—not just with the ends of the reins ? "

Elizabeth did not answer. Pleasant slipped off the seat and leaned over the dash-board to pat Captain; then tried sitting sidewise with her legs under her.

" This is the way the cat sits; I never understood before what she did with her back legs. The tail is easy; she just lays it over her front

legs." Then she slid down again to sit on the floor of the buggy and hang her head over the wheel to see the tracks in the dust. Elizabeth came out of her dream at this, and bade the child get up on the seat.

"Where are we going?" Pleasant said, climbing up joyfully; but she had to repeat her question before her mother heard it.

"To Old Chester, dear child."

"Oh, that 's miles and miles away!" Pleasant said, excitedly; and turned, kneeling down on the seat, so that she could clasp her mother's neck with both little warm loving arms. "Oh, I *am* glad we 're going so far away, it 's so interesting to take a long journey. I was afraid you would be turning round pretty soon. Who are you going to see, mother?"

"I 'm going to see a minister who lives there, Pleasant."

Pleasant looked serious, as befitted the mention of a minister.

"Why are you going to see a minister?"

"Pleasant, you must not ask so many questions! I never knew a little girl talk so much."

Pleasant looked troubled, and drew a long breath. "Well, mother, it 's my thoughts. If I did n't have so many thoughts, I would n't talk. Do you have thoughts, mother?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Well, yes, Pleasant, I do."

"Well, you see!" cried Pleasant, triumphantly. "Tell me a few of your thoughts, please, mother."

"Oh, my dear child, do be quiet!" the mother entreated. "Oh, my *God!*" she said, under her breath. There was something in her face that did silence the child, for a time at least. Elizabeth drew up at a spring by the road-side, and brought out a lunch-basket and gave the little

girl something to eat. She did not eat herself, but sat absently flecking at a weed with her whip, and watching Captain plunging his nose down into the trough. Pleasant climbed out to get a drink, putting her lips against the mossy wooden pipe, from which a single sparkling thread of water fell into the great hollowed log. They could hear some one whetting a scythe in a field higher up on the hill, above the woods. The sunshine sifted down through the thick foliage, and the yellow flower of the monkey-weed, just on the edge of the trough, caught it, and glittered like a jewel. Captain stamped a little among the wet stones and mud, and pulled at the reins; and Elizabeth said, "Well, go 'long, Captain."

The horse started in a steady jogging trot, keeping carefully on the shady side of the road. A fresh wind had sprung up, and along the

horizon a few white clouds had heaped themselves into shining domes, but the sky was exquisitely and serenely blue. The creek had widened into a little narrow river, deep and brown, and fringed with sycamores; men were haying in the meadows and in the orchards on the hill-sides, and the hot smell of newly cut grass was in the air.

Elizabeth Day drew up before a mile-post, and leaned out of the buggy, trying to read the nearly effaced figures. "It 's only three miles more, Pleasant," she said, breathlessly.

"Shall we get some dinner in Old Chester?" Pleasant asked, with anxiety.

"Why, my dear child, you 've just had some dinner. Still, there is more in the basket, if you want it. You can eat it while I get out and visit with the minister. You must be a good girl, Pleasant, and wait

outside in the buggy. I' ll hitch Captain."

" I 'll hold the reins," Pleasant declared; " he won't try and run if you hitch him and I hold the reins. Captain is a good old horse—good Captain! good boy!" she continued, hanging over the dash-board to stroke his black tail. Captain switched it, with mild impatience, and Pleasant drew back, offended; then tried sliding off the seat. " But the dash-board gets in the way of my knees," she complained. Her mother did not notice her. The little warm body pressing against her, tumbling over her, the sudden embraces, the bubbling words, the overflowing activity and restlessness, were like the touch of foam against a rock.

" Mother," Pleasant began, " one of my thoughts was, whose little girl would I be if you had n't married father? Would I live with him, or would I live with you? It 's very

interesting to have thoughts like that," said Pleasant.

"It 's very foolish," Elizabeth said, sharply; and again the child was silenced, looking sidewise at her mother, not knowing whether she had been naughty or not.

It was nearly twelve when they reached Old Chester. Pleasant was quite cheerful again, and bubbling over with questions.

Mrs. Day was pale, and her whole body tingled and trembled. How familiar it was! The stone tavern with the wide porch; that had been her window, the one in the corner; she had sat there, in the painted rocking-chair, when Peter told her he wanted to marry her. And that was the church; right beyond it was the minister's house. She remembered that they had walked across the green in front of the church to go to the rectory. It suddenly came over her, in a wave of terror, that he

might be dead, that old man! She took out the whip, and struck Captain sharply; he leaped forward, and the jerk fairly knocked the breath out of Pleasant, who was in the middle of a question. Elizabeth felt, poor woman, that she could not bear one instant's more anxiety: if he were *dead*—oh, what should she do? He had been an old man, she remembered.

Captain went briskly down the street, and Elizabeth was so weak with misery and apprehension she could scarcely stop him at the parsonage gate.

V

"Will you be quiet, Pleasant, and not get out of the buggy?" Elizabeth said. She pulled the weight from under the seat and fastened the catch into Captain's bit. He put his soft nose against her wrist, and she stopped, trembling, to pat him.

Then she went up the path between the garden borders: she and Peter had walked along that path. Oh dear, she was beginning to cry! She could not speak to the minister if she was going to cry. She had to wait and wipe her eyes and let the tremor and swelling of her throat subside before she rang and asked if she might see Dr. Lavendar.

" He 's goin' to have his dinner in about fifteen minutes," Mary said, sourly. She did not mean to have the rectory meals delayed by inconsiderate people arriving at twelve o'clock. " And she 'll worry the life out of him, anyhow," Mary reflected. Mary had seen too many tragic faces come to that door not to recognize this one.

" Who 's there ? " demanded Dr. Lavendar from the study; and then came peering out into the hall, which was dusky, because the vines hung low over the lintel, letting the light

filter in green and soft across the threshold. When he saw the strange face he came forward to welcome her. He had on a flowered dressing-gown, and his spectacles had been pushed back and rested on his white hair, which stood up very stiff and straight. "Come in," he said, abruptly; and Mary, feeling herself worsted, retired, muttering, to the kitchen.

Mrs. Day followed the minister into the study, but when he closed the door behind her and pointed to a chair, and said, cheerfully, "And what can I do for you, ma'am?" she could hardly find her voice to answer him.

She was conscious of a sense of relief that the room did not look as it did the night that she and Peter had stood up to be married. The furniture had been moved about, and it was daylight instead of lamplight, and through the open window

she could see Pleasant hanging over the dash-board stroking Captain, who was nibbling at the grass by the path.

"I suppose you don't remember me, sir?" she said.

"I 'm afraid I don't," he confessed, smiling. "An old man's memory is n't good for much, you know."

She tried to smile too, but her face felt stiff.

"You married us, sir; my name is Day. Peter Day is my husband."

Dr. Lavendar reflected. "Day? The name is familiar, but I don't recall— Let me see; when was it?"

"It 's twelve years ago next month, sir," Elizabeth said, and added where she came from, and, with a little pride in her voice, that her husband was well known in Upper Chester. "Why, you must have heard of Peter Day!" she said.

But Dr. Lavendar did not commit

himself. He hoped Mr. Day was well. And was that little girl in the buggy hers? Had she other children? And all the while he looked at her with his keen, twinkling brown eyes.

"I came to see you," Elizabeth began, in a wavering voice, "because —because I thought you would give me some advice."

"I find it 's easier for me to give advice than for people to take it," he answered, good-humoredly; but now she did not even try to smile.

"I 'm in great trouble, sir; I—I thought you were the only person who could help me. I 've thought of coming to see you for the last year."

"Have you had any dinner?" demanded Dr. Lavendar, looking at her over his spectacles.

"No; I don't want any, sir. I only want—"

"You want food," he declared,

nodding his head; and called Mary, and bade her bring in dinner, and fetch the little girl. "Yes, you must have some food; the advice of one empty stomach to another is n't to be trusted. Come! you 'll feel better for a cup of tea." Then he stopped and put his veined old hand on her arm. "You have n't the worst trouble in the world," he said; "be sure of that."

Afterwards she wondered what he meant. What trouble could be worse than hers? But he said no more about trouble. He made his two visitors sit down with him, and he listened to Pleasant's chatter, and talked about his bee-hives, and promised to show her his precious stones, and let her give his shaggy little dog Danny a crust of bread. Then he asked her whom she was named after.

"Why, after mother!" said Pleasant, astonished that he did not

know. "Mother's front name is Elizabeth, but father said he named me Pleasant because mother's eyes were pleasant, and her voice was, and her face was, and her—"

"Pleasant, you must not talk so much," Elizabeth protested, much mortified. "My husband is such a kind man, sir, he says things like that," she explained.

But Pleasant, excited by the strangeness of the occasion, could not be restrained; she was bubbling over with information—Captain, and her two brothers, and mother's garden, and father's dog Jim, that had a grave in the orchard, and a really marble tombstone that said, "Jim—a good friend." "He died before I was born, so I don't remember him very well," she said; but father had given mother a new dog, named Fanny; and he had given her, Pleasant, a duck, for her own, which hatched chickens. "And their own

mother can't make 'em swim!" Pleasant informed her hearer, excitedly. "Father said I must n't try and teach 'em (though I would just as leave), because it would worry mother. Would it worry you, mother?"

"Pleasant, dear, I think you had better go out and sit in the buggy now—"

"For fear Captain will run away?" suggested Pleasant, eagerly.

"She talks a great deal, sir," Elizabeth apologized. "She 's our only little girl, and I 'm afraid we spoil her."

Perhaps Dr. Lavendar had gained what he wanted from the child; he made no protest at her dismissal, and she went frolicking out to climb up into the buggy and sit in the sun, chattering to Captain, and weaving three long larch twigs together to make a wreath.

Mrs. Day and the minister went

back into the study. Her heart was beginning to beat heavily. She sat down where she could look through the open window and see Pleasant, and the light fell full on her pretty, worn face. She was rolling up the corner of her pocket-handkerchief, and then spreading it out on her knee and smoothing it with shaking fingers. She did not once raise her eyes to his face.

"It 's this way, sir: I wanted to ask you—I thought I 'd come and ask you, because you married us, and you are a stranger to us (and you are a minister)—oh, I thought I 'd ask you what—I must do!"

Dr. Lavendar was silent.

"There 's something I 've got on my mind. It 's just killing me. It 's something my husband don't know. If he was n't just the best husband in the world, it would n't kill me the way it does. But there never was anybody as good as Peter

—no, not even a minister is any better than him. We 've been married twelve years, and I ought to know. Well, it ain't only that he 's just the kindest man in the world—it 's his being so good. He is n't like other men. He don't have the kind of thoughts they do. He don't understand some things—not any more than Pleasant does. Oh, Peter is so good—if he only was n't so good!"

She was red and then white; she held her shaking lip between her teeth, and looked out at Pleasant.

"It seemed as if you could help me if I told you; and yet now it seems as if there was n't any help anywhere."

"There is help, my friend."

She seemed to grasp at his words.

"Oh, sir, if you 'll tell me what to do— Well, it 's this: you see, you married Peter and me suddenly; he did n't really know anything about me; he fell in love with me, seeing

me in a play. Well, before I met Peter—that 's what I want to tell you—"

"Do not tell me."

"Don't tell you?" She looked at him in a bewildered way.

"Is there any reparation to make? Is there anything to be set right?"

"No," she said, with a sob; "oh *no!* nothing can make it right."

"Then it is not necessary for me to know, to advise you. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that it 's the worst thing that could be. Now, my dear Mrs. Day, the worst thing that could be differs for every one of us. It might be murder for one person; it might be a lie for another person; it might be the preaching of the gospel for somebody else. But say it 's your worst. Do you doubt your husband's forgiveness?"

"I don't think he 'd even call it forgiveness," she said, after a pause,

twisting and untwisting the corner of her handkerchief with trembling fingers. "Peter just—loves me; that 's all. But it would—oh, it would *hurt* Peter so!"

"You have a good husband, I am sure of that," he said, quietly. "And your question, as I understand it, is, shall you tell him some grievous fault, committed before you knew him? I can say at once"—Elizabeth looked ghastly—"that you ought to have told him before you married him."

"So I ought to tell him now?" she said, in a whisper.

"Do you want to tell him?"

"Oh, sometimes it seems as if I would die if I did n't," she said. "It would be such a relief. I think, if he knew it, I could forget it. I lie awake nights, thinking and thinking how I can tell him, till my mind 's sore, it seems to me. I think to myself that I 'll tell him as soon as he

wakes up." She stopped, and swallowed once or twice, and pressed her lips together as though to force back tears. "And then, again, I feel as though I would die if I told him. Why, Peter thinks I am about perfect, I believe. It sounds foolish to say that, but it 's true, sir. It would be like—like I don't know what—like stabbing him. I don't mean he 'd be unkind to me, or anything like that. It is n't that that scares me. But it would be like putting a knife into him. But perhaps that 's part of my punishment," she ended, wretchedly.

"Mother," Pleasant called from the garden path, "may I go and see the minister's bees?"

Dr. Lavendar went to the window and told her cheerfully that she might. "But you must not touch the hives, remember," he cautioned her.

And then he came and sat down

again at his table. He took off his spectacles and put them into a little shabby case; then he passed his hand over his eyes once or twice.

"'Part of your punishment.' You would not wish to escape any part of it, of course? There is a great satisfaction in punishment."

A quick understanding came into her face. "I know what you mean. I 've thought sometimes I 'd like to be a Catholic and have penances; I could beat myself to death, and call it happiness!" she ended, passionately.

"Yes; you must not shirk your punishment," he said, slowly. "But there 's one thing we must find out: does your husband deserve any punishment?"

"Peter!" she cried. "Why, he never did anything wrong in his life!"

"Then have you any right to make him share your punishment?

You say that if he knew this old sin of yours, you could forget it; but would he forget it? You would pay a great price for forgetfulness, my dear friend, if you brought him into the shadow in which you walk. Have you ever thought you might be selfish in not being willing to bear this weight alone?"

"*What?*" she said, breathlessly—"not tell him?"

"Listen," he said, with a sudden stern dignity: he was the priest, instead of the kindly old man: "you have sinned long ago. I don't know how—I don't want to know. But it is passed, and there is no reparation to make. You have sinned, and suffered for your sin; you have asked your Heavenly Father to forgive you, and He has forgiven you. But still you suffer. Woman, be thankful that you can suffer; the worst trouble in the world is the trouble that does not know God, and so does

not suffer. Without such knowledge there is no suffering. The sense of sin in the human soul is the apprehension of Almighty God. Your salvation has drawn nigh unto you ! Now take your suffering; bear it, sanctify it, lift it up; let it bring you nearer to your Saviour. But do not, do not, put it on shoulders where it does not belong. Do not stab your husband's heart by weakly, selfishly —*selfishly*, mind you!—telling him of a past with which it is too late now for him to concern himself."

She drew a long breath. "But you don't know what it was. If you knew—"

"It does not matter what the sin was. All that matters is, what your love is."

"But I am afraid—oh, I am afraid that in my heart I don't want to tell him. Oh, I may be deceiving myself if I call it a duty not to tell him !"

" No, you are not deceiving yourself. You don't want to tell him because it is your instinct to spare him. Perhaps, too, you have the instinct to spare yourself, in his eyes. But silence does not really spare you —don't you know that? It only spares him! Silence is agony to you sometimes. Well, then, bear the agony for his sake. Don't you love him enough for that? You talk about penance — my friend, such silence will be worse than any penance of the Romish Church!"

She clung to his hands, crying now unrestrainedly. " And I am not to keep thinking, ' Shall I tell Peter?' I 'm not to keep thinking I 'm deceiving him?"

" My child, you are not deceiving him. He thinks you are a good woman: *you are.* Look back over these years and see what wonderful things the Lord hath wrought in you. Go down on your knees and thank

Him for it. Don't deny it; don't be afraid to own it to yourself,—that would be ingratitude to your Father in heaven. Instead, thank Him that you are *good!* And now listen: I charge you bear the burden of silence, because you love your husband, and he is good."

Elizabeth looked at him, rapt, absorbed. "I am not to be afraid that it is for my own wicked fear that I am not telling him? No, it is n't that, it is n't that! I know it is n't. For his sake—for his sake—"

"Yes, for his sake."

But he looked at her pityingly. Would this comfort of deliberately chosen pain be temporary? "Try," he said, "and think that you stand between him and pain; take all the misery yourself; be glad to take it. Don't let it reach him."

"If I think of it that way," she said, breathlessly, "I—I can *love* it!"

" Think of it that way always."

He made her sit down again, and went out to find Pleasant, leaving her with the peace of one solemnly elate at the recognition of the cross on which she must agonize for the happiness of some other soul.

" Suppose," said Dr. Lavendar, watching the buggy pulling up the hill, " suppose I had n't found her a good woman, and a good wife, and a good mother—should I have told her to hold her tongue ? Well, I 'm thankful it was n't that kind of a question! Lord, I 'm glad Thou hast all us puzzled people in Thy wise keeping. Come, Danny, let 's go and see the bees."

THE END

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